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A Seven-Branched Menorah Graffito from Kafr Mukhmas

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In the 1980's, during the Benjamin Region Survey, an as yet unpublished graffito of a seven-branched menorah from a tomb on the outskirts of the village of Mukhmas was discovered. This study discusses the find and its implications as well as suggesting that the village of Mukhmas was a priestly settlement during the Second Temple period.

Introduction

In the 1980s, during the Benjamin Region Survey initiated by the Staff Office for Archaeology in Judea and Samaria, burial caves, residential caves, and cisterns were documented within the area of the village of Mukhmas, located 9 km northeast of Jerusalem. On the façade of one burial cave near the southeastern section of the village, an as yet unpublished charcoal graffito was discovered (new Israel grid 22680/64205).[1]

The entrance to this burial was cut through the wall of a large circular cave, possibly a cistern, with a diameter of about 7 m and a height of about 4 m. Two entrances were found—one in the northwestern wall and the other in the eastern wall. The entrance to the northwestern burial was sealed with a rolling stone. The burial chamber had *arcosolia*. The eastern burial had a 1 m wide square recess. This entrance leads to a burial chamber, 2.0 × 2.7 m. No information was provided about the chamber's architecture. On the wall above this entrance is a drawing of a seven-branched menorah, and above it is another graffito resembling the letter *heh* [ה] or *ḥet* [ח] in the paleo-Hebrew script (Figs 1–2).

Description

The graffito is approximately 30 cm above the top of the entrance. The menorah depicted is approximately 50 cm wide and 30 cm high. It has a flat base (c. 10 cm wide) and seven branches—six branches coming out of a central branch. The branches are the same height and curved, except for the right-hand (southern) branch, which has a slight bend at the centre. The base of the Mukhmas menorah is

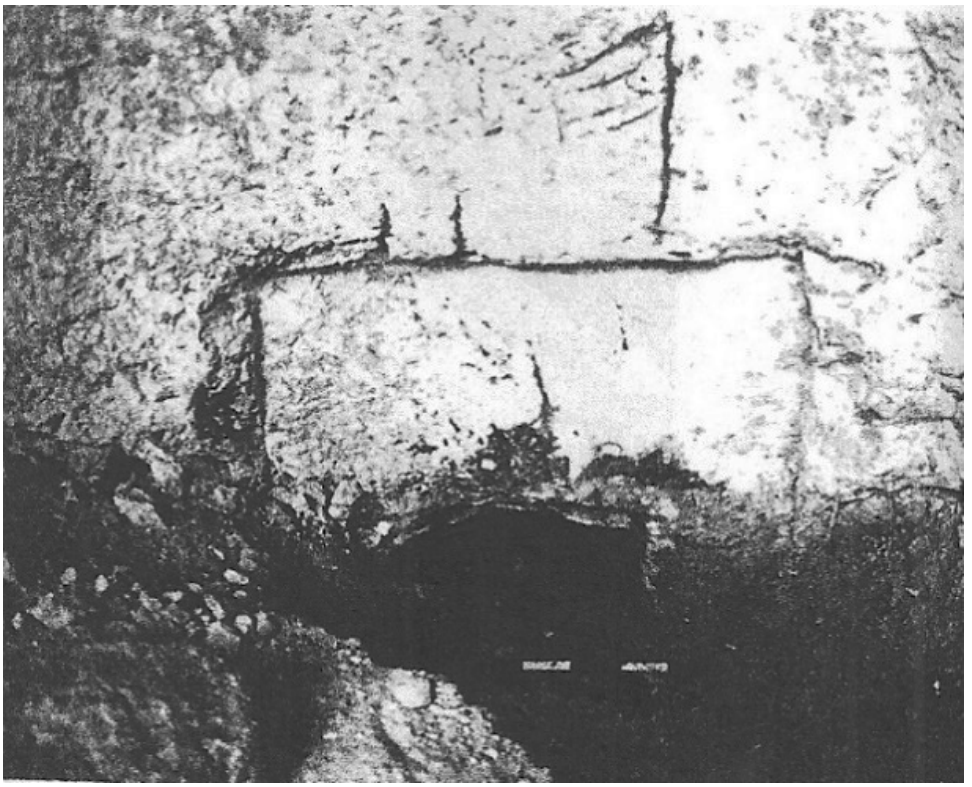

Fig. 1. Photograph of the façade of the tomb in the area of the village of Mukhmas (courtesy of the Unit of Staff Officer for Archaeology in Judea and Samaria).

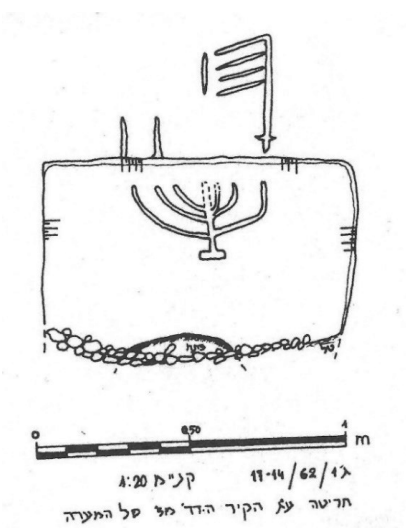

Fig. 2: Drawing of the façade of the menorah's tomb (Courtesy of the Unit of Staff Officer for Archaeology in Judea and Samaria).

flat but not trapezoidal, and hence should be classified as a schematic representation. In most depictions of the menorah on artifacts from the Second Temple period, the base consists of separate legs and is occasionally a triangle (Reich and Shukron 2011: 71–72). These shapes are certainly closer to the original than the Mukhmas image, since only a large and solid base could have provided stability to the massive gold menorah that stood in the Temple.[2]

A symbol that looks like the letter *heh* or *ḥet* in the paleo-Hebrew script, about 40 cm high and 20 cm wide, was scratched above the entryway and the right side of the menorah. It consists of four horizontal lines perpendicular to a vertical line. Considering the unusual appearance and location of this mark at the edge of the façade, it might be a random symbol.[3]

If it is in fact an inscription in paleo-Hebrew, this would be a rare instance of such, because the paleo-Hebrew script, which was commonplace in the region during the First Temple period, became rare during the Second Temple period and disappeared after the Bar-Kokhba revolt (Naveh 1987: 65–66, 78, 112; Naeh 2008: 125–127). The epigraphic finds from the Second Temple period indicate that the paleo-Hebrew script was used mainly on Jewish coins and in religious texts (such as the Qumran caves), and in relatively rare instances in burial inscriptions, ostraca, and weights (for a bibliography, see Abadi 2017: 66–67). According to Diringer, during the Second Temple period the paleo-Hebrew script was used by the Sadducees (Diringer 1950: 46–49). Naveh believes that the use of the paleo-Hebrew script in the late Second Temple period had a nationalist meaning and may have also conveyed holiness (Naveh 1989: 117). If the Mukhmas graffito is a paleo-Hebrew letter, it may indicate the tomb's owners were associated with the small groups that continued to use the script during the Second Temple period, probably *kohanim*.

Dating the Tomb and the Graffito

In the absence of artifacts that could help date the cave, dating is based solely on similar hewn architecture nearby. The discovery of many *kokh* and shelf tombs around Kafr Mukhmas, especially near this burial cave, and the discovery of Second Temple period shelf tombs in the Bethel highlands (Raviv, Forthcoming), may indicate a similar date.[4]

The Benjamin Survey found four clusters of tombs surrounding the village, with approximately 70 burial caves (Finkelstein and Magen 1993: 180–182, 184–187). *Kokh* tombs were found in three of the four clusters, including two shelf tombs and two arcosolium tombs. The tomb discussed here is in the centre of the southeastern cluster, primarily *kokh* and shaft tombs (idem, 184, site 222). A broken ossuary and shards from the Roman period were found near the northwestern cluster (idem, 181, site 213). In addition, three ossuaries purchased by the German Protestant Institute

Fig 3. Photograph of one of the menorahs drawn in cistern at el-'Aliliyat cliffs (Patrich and Rubin 1983: 8).

of Archaeology were found in or near the village of Mukhmas (for a bibliography, see Zissu 2001: 70). One bears the name 'Shimeon L[evi]' in Hebrew script. A Jewish settlement at this location, first identified by Klein in literary sources as Mikhmas (1939: 18; Tsafrir *et al.* 1994: 173). The archaeological finds indicate that this settlement was populated by Jewish inhabitants until the early 2nd century CE, during the time of the Bar-Kokhba revolt.

Evidence for Jewish settlement in Mikhmas during the period between the revolts comes from the emergency survey's discoveries in the centre of Mukhmas, and in Kh. Hara el-Foqa and Tel Miriam, which are also within the borders of the village, with storage jars and cooking pots dated to the decades between the revolts. In addition, two refuge caves from the Bar-Kokhba revolt were documented near Mukhmas (el-'Aliliyat and el-Jai caves; Eshel *et al.* 1998).

Many parallels exist of a menorah as a decorative element in Jewish art of the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods, roughly from the 2nd to 6th century CE, as well as a handful of examples from the Second Temple period to the Bar-Kokhba revolt.[5] Early instances typically have seven branches, a flaring base (trapezoidal or conical), and curved branches (Hachlili 2001: 163-164; 2016: 198), similar to the menorah decorating the Mukhmas tomb. The mark of the letter *heh* or *ḥet* in the paleo-Hebrew script may also support the proposed dating. There

was a Jewish presence in Mukhmas from the Second Temple period until the Bar-Kokhba revolt but no later, since the Jewish settlements in this area were destroyed at the end of the revolt and not re-established until the modern era. Thus, the presence of the menorah graffito on the façade of the tomb is indicative of no later than the 2nd century CE.

The Finds from the el-'Aliliyat Caves

Nearby, Patrich and Rubin documented two seven-branched menorah graffitos in the el-'Aliliyat caves in the northern cliff-wall of Nahal Mikhmas, about 2 km southeast of the village (Patrich and Rubin 1983; Patrich 1985). The caves mainly served as a refuge and hideout during the Second Temple period and the anti-Roman rebellions. Noteworthy among the remains documented there are a typical ritual bath and cistern. Furthermore, on the walls of the cistern are charcoal drawings of two menorahs with seven curved branches (Fig. 3) and an Aramaic-Hebrew inscription: יועזר אתעקר עלו מטרנא '*Joʿezer itʿaqar ʿalu matran[a]*.' Patrich interpreted the inscription as: 'Joezer was uprooted, the guards (*mishmarot*) entered.' Considering that the term *mishmar* denoted a Roman military unit (the term *mishmarot* was used in the difficult to date *Lamentations Rabbah* [1:5] for those units that Hadrian stationed in Judea during the Bar-Kokhba revolt, Patrich proposed that Yoezer was wounded when Roman soldiers entered the cave complex while attacking the Jewish rebels who had taken refuge there (Patrich 1985: 159). Yet, an analysis of the word *mishmar/ot* in Talmudic texts reveals that in tannaitic sources (Mishnah and Tosefta) it always designates the priestly divisions, whereas the meaning of roadblocks or military units is added in amoraic texts.[6] The inscription matarna in the el-'Aliliyat caves should be understood in the older meaning—priestly divisions. Ehrlich and later Patrich proposed that the name Joezer, the menorah graffiti, and the ritual bath all suggest the presence of *kohanim* (priests) at this location (Erlich 1984; Patrich, 1985: 163). In 2012, Shivtiel noted additional examples of cliffside refuges with ritual baths, which he associated with priestly settlements (Shivtiel 2012).

Discussion

The seven-branched menorahs at Kafr Mukhmas and in the el-'Aliliyat caves are unusual. Decorative use of the Temple menorah was rare in the Second Temple period and during the Bar-Kokhba revolt; merely a few examples have been found. These include merely three objects or fragments discovered in Jerusalem and dated to the Second Temple period: a stone sundial discovered in the excavations at the foot of the Temple Mount (Mazar 1972: 82), pieces of plaster uncovered by the excavations in the Jewish Quarter (Avigad 1983: 147–149; Habas 2003), the walls

of the antechamber of Jason's Tomb (Rahmani 1967: 73–74), and part of a stone vessel found in the City of David (Reich and Shukron 2011). In the 1st century BCE, the menorah was also depicted on coins minted by Mattathias Antigonus (died in 37 BCE; Meshorer 1982: 92–94); and the first appearance of menorah in a 1st century CE synagogue setting was found at Migdal, north of Tiberias (Avshalom-Gorni and Najar 2013; Fine 2017; Hachlili 2017). In addition, three graffiti of *menorot* were found on the walls of a Second Temple period oil press at Beit Loya, southeast of Maresha (Gutfeld and Haber 2009: 18–19).

Several images of the menorah have been found also on Judean oil lamps (Darom lamps) from the period between the two revolts (Sussman 2012: 131–133) and on two ossuaries, one from Jerusalem and the other from Jericho (Rahmani 1980). Not only are there few instances of the menorah in Jewish art before the end of the Bar-Kokhba revolt, it is notably absent from the coins of the Great Revolt and Bar-Kokhba revolt. Outside of Israel, there is the well-known depiction of the menorah on the Arch of Titus in Rome, constructed in 82 CE, by the Emperor Domitian commemorating Titus' victories.[7]

Scholars have interpreted this dearth of representations of the menorah as compliance with the halakhic prohibition on making a 'menorah like the menorah', (ie. the one from the Temple) stated in a Babylonian Talmud *baraita* (B *Avodah Zarah* 43a; B *Rosh Hashanah* 24ab; B *Menahot* 28b). Yet as Adler has recently shown, this ban applies only to making an actual menorah, not a figurative representation.[8] He proposed instead there are very few decorative uses of the Temple menorah before the 3rd century CE because it had not yet become a key Jewish symbol.[9] Several scholars noted that those menorah images found are certainly associated with the Temple and the priests who served in it. For example, Rahmani wrote the following: 'Representations of *menorot* from before 70 CE, as well as the depiction of an altar, must be associated with the Temple priesthood, for whom the seven-branched *menorah* seems to have been an emblem' (Rahmani 1994: 51). Similarly, according to Levine: '…it seems quite reasonable to assume that the menorah's representation is to be associated first and fore-most with the sanctity and centrality of Jerusalem Temple. Moreover, there is some justification for also assuming that depicting the menorah is to be associated particularly, and perhaps even exclusively, with Jerusalem's priestly class' (Levine 2000: 136 and note 31; supported by Hachlili, 2016: 207).

Menorahs in the Mikhmas area have seven branches. This design, which is based on that of the original menorah in the Temple, is prominent in examples from the Second Temple period, as opposed to those that date from after the Temple's destruction. For example, seven-branched menorahs can be seen on the coins of Antigonus, in Jason's Tomb, in the Jewish Quarter excavations, on

the sundial, on stone vessels, and on the Arch of Titus. The menorah on clay lamps and ossuaries from the period between the revolts tends to have eight to ten branches. Many scholars have explained that the changes in the menorah's shape, such as additional branches, stemmed from the halakhic prohibition of making a 'menorah like *the* menorah'. Additional examples of the use of the seven-branched menorah as a decorative motif in the period between the revolts are the ossuary published by Rahmani (1980: 114–115) and several Judean oil lamps. Another possible example is the ossuary decorated with a many-branched menorah (Rahmani 1994: Pl. 128: 848).

Patrich proposed dating the seven branch menorah style to the Second Temple period rather than the decades between the revolts (Patrich 1985: 164). He asserts that this design, typical of the Second Temple period, accords with evidence indicating that the Jews' last use of the cliffside cave refuge was during the Great Revolt. However, Eshel and Zissu proposed dating the graffiti and the jars discovered at these cliffside caves to the Bar-Kokhba revolt (Eshel *et al.* 1998: 106–107). Because the inscriptions and the drawings of the menorah were made in the same way (with a soot-covered stick), it seems that the latter, too, should be dated to the time of the Bar-Kokhba revolt. The el-'Aliliyat menorahs may have seven branches simply because the number of branches is not important in merely schematic representations, as Adler has proposed (2007: 164–166). He holds that the seven-branched menorah is typical of monumental rather than schematic images of the menorah. The discovery of a 'monumental' menorah on the façade of the Mukhmas tomb supports this idea.

The seven-branched menorah on the wall of the tomb in Mukhmas, dating from the Second Temple period (or the period between the revolts), is unique. Images of menorahs on tombs, as well as on building facades or walls, were common during the Late Roman and Byzantine periods (Hachlili 2001: 318–336); a conspicuous example is Beth Shearim (Avigad 1971: 196–200).

To date, the only known tomb from the Second Temple period in which a menorah is depicted is Jason's Tomb (Rahmani 1967: 74). However, the drawings there are relatively small and schematic, on the walls of the antechamber, and not a large and prominent menorah in the precise image of the Temple menorah (other than the schematic base), like that in Mukhmas tomb. Additional examples of the use of the menorah as a funerary decoration are the two ossuaries mentioned above, now in the Israel Museum (Rahmani 1980: 114–115). One of these is decorated with a five-branched menorah, while the cover of the second ossuary has a carving of a seven-branched menorah. The names on the second ossuary are Hananiah and Hanana/Hanan, typical priestly names.

The discovery of the graffiti of seven-branched menorahs in the el-'Aliliyat caves and in Kafr Mukhmas supports the idea that the decorative use of the menorah

during the Second Temple period until the Bar-Kokhba revolt was associated with the Temple and a priestly population. Both the archaeological finds in Mikhmas discussed here and references to the settlement in literary sources indicate the village's link to the Temple. A further possible example of the use of the menorah to ornament priestly tombs of the Second Temple period is the inscription tomb that Sukenik documented in Wadi Haramiya (Sukenik 1933). A large graffito, 80 cm high and 55 cm wide, was found on the façade of the 'Bilgah Tomb' (proposed to have been connected with the Bilgah priestly family), to the left of the entrance. Sukenik interpreted it as a primitive depiction of a palm tree, with some of its fronds rising upwards and other branches, apparently the dry ones, curving downwards. Zissu discussed the similarity between the upper part of this 'palm tree' and the seven-branched menorah (Zissu 2001: 32). The addition of the branches that point down and the absence of a base prevent us from determining the artist's original intent. A similar shape is depicted on several ossuaries published by Rahmani (1994: 51–52; Pl. 83: 579; Pl. 103: 730; Pl. 117: 799; Pl. 127: 842; Pl. 128: 848–849; Pl. 129: 851, 852, 855) and on ossuaries from the Jericho 'priestly city' necropolis (Hachlili and Killebrew 1999: 113). In all these examples the upper section (the palm branches that point upwards and mimic the shape of the menorah) is 'heavier' than the lower section. In any case, the notable lack of examples of the use of the menorah in the context of Jewish funerary art during the Second Temple era until the Bar-Kokhba revolt, compared to the Late Roman and Byzantine periods, may indicate that at first the menorah was described in terms of simplistic symbolic meaning (as, for instance, a symbol of priestly identification, etc.), and only afterwards it was used increasingly as an expression of the Messianic idea or a belief in resurrection of the dead (Barag 1999: 73; Habas 1999; Baruch *et al.* 2018).

On the basis of later written sources, the clearest reference is from the difficult to date M *Menahot* 8:1 (and its parallel in the Tosefta), which mentions Mikhmas as a source of choice fine flour for meal-offerings that intended for the Temple. Although the Mishnah was compiled after the destruction of the Temple, many scholars consider the descriptions of matters related to the Temple, such as the pilgrimages to Jerusalem, as an accurate portrayal of the practice during the Second Temple period (see, for example, Baer, 1952: 20-21; 1955: 74-80; Epstein, 1957: 44; Urbach, 1972: 95; Bitton-Ashkelony, 1984: 59-70, 88; Instone-Brewer, 2004: 404-410; for more critical evaluation of the Rabbinic sources, see for example, Hezser 1993; 382-405). It is possible that the choice of the arid fields of Mikhmas has to do with *kohanim* who lived there during the Second Temple period and were responsible for growing wheat intended for use in the Temple.

Another possible example of a priestly village assigned to provide agricultural produce for the Temple is Beit Rimah (identified with the village

of Beit Rimah in western Samaria), mentioned in M *Menahot* (8:6) as one of the places that provided wine for libations in the Temple. This village is also mentioned as the residence of a priest who allegedly lived during the Yavneh generation, ie. 70–136 CE (*Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Schechter Edition*). Klein pointed out a similar possibility: 'Who knows whether the production of ritually pure wine for libations was assigned to these people [the Essenes], who strictly observed the laws of purity, not only here [Ein Gedi] but also in the other places mentioned in our Mishnah?' (1939: 141). Klein referred to two passages in *Canticles Rabbah* that highlight the ritual purity of those who produced and transported items for use in the Temple: one about the priests, who are meticulous in this matter when they go to bring commodities for the Temple (4:13), and the other citing Ein Gedi as a place where wine for libations was produced in ritual purity (15:1). Klein also proposed that the reference to priestly families who 'made the incense' (such as 'the clan of Avtinas') supports the idea that they were also engaged in growing the plants from which the incense was compounded (ibid., 141). We may assume these were *kohanim*. Considering the textual variants, this identification is in doubt; MS New York has 'Beit Ramata', while MS Parma of *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, recension B (ch. 27) has 'Ramat Beit 'Anat.'[10] Safrai and Safrai proposed accepting the latter variant and locating the place in the Galilee; they maintained that Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai remained in contact with Galileans even after his return to Jamnia (Safrai and Safrai 1976: 19). However, a comparison of the manuscript variants does not permit a clear decision as to which is the original.

A further example is the priestly village of Beit Hakerem (identified with Ein Karem on the western outskirts of contemporary Jerusalem), which supplied the stones for the altar and its access ramp (M. *Middoth* 3:4). Although the Mishnah refers to the 'Beit Hakerem valley', which is in the Lower Galilee, there is no doubt that the reference in this case is to Beit Hakerem near Jerusalem (Klein, 1939: 90).

The probably 2nd century BCE Book of Maccabees is an earlier source indicating the presence of *kohanim* in Mikhmas as early as the beginning of the Hasmonean period is the report that Jonathan the Hasmonean set up headquarters in Mikhmas (*1 Macc*. 9:73). His choice of the town as the base from which to consolidate his control of Judea may have been linked in part to the presence in the village of some *kohanim*. Due to the difficulty in determining the exact date of the menorah's graffito and the scarcity of explicit references to priests in Mikhmas during the Second Temple period, it is a possible that a group reached the site only after the destruction of the Temple and lived there during the period between the revolts, similar to the priests who were settled in the nearby city of Gophna during Titus' siege of Jerusalem (*War* XI, 115–116).

Notes

1. The objects presented here are taken from the survey report, filed in the archives of the Staff Officer for Archaeology in Judea and Samaria (file 13/58). I am grateful to Hanania Hizmi and Binyamin Har-Even of that unit for the opportunity to review the survey archive. In addition, I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Preparation of this article was supported by the the Jeselsohn Epigraphic Centre for Jewish History and the Koschitzky Fund and Krauthammer Chair of the the Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology at Bar-Ilan University.
2. See Levine 2000: 138–139, and the bibliography cited there and Fine 2016: 1–16. On the base of the Menorah, see Fine 2016: 30–32.
3 I would like to thank Prof. Esther Eshel for her assistance in the attempt to decipher the graffito.
4. *Kokh* burial began in the Hellenistic period and continued through the Bar-Kokhba revolt in Judea (Kloner and Zissu 2003: 32–36) and is found even later in Samaria and the Galilee (*c.f.* Magen 2002: 256; Vitto 2010). For a discussion of the earliest use of shelf tombs during the early Second Temple period, see Kloner and Zelinger 2007: 209–220.
5. See: Levine 2000: 134–137; 2012; Hachlili 2001; Fine 2005: 147–150; Fine 2016: 17-76.
6. I would like to thank Dr. Doron Sar-Avi for this point.
7. For a detailed architectural and artistic description and analysis of the Arch of Titus, see Pfanner 1983.
8. See parallels in B *Menahot* 28b and B *Rosh Hashanah* 24ab. For a list of the scholars who held this view, see Adler 2007: 163. It is difficult to date this *baraita*. Judging by the mention of Rabbi Yosi Bar Yehuda, this source can be dated to the end of the second century to the beginning of the third century CE but not later (Barag 1999: 73). For another opinion that this *baraita* should be accepted as being from the Hasmonean period, see Brand 1953: 304.
9. For discussion on the process of turning the menorah into a symbol of Jewish identity, see Hachlili 2016 and Fine 2016.
10. Both manuscripts date to the 9th century CE (Kister 1998: 220), but it is accepted to date the beginning of this source to the end of the period of the Tannaim (Reizel 2011: 320-325).

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